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a **NEW** detective story by

JACK RITCHIE

Jack Ritchie has an interesting plot-technique. Other detective writers have used it, but somehow, in a way that can't really be explained, Mr. Ritchie has made the technique his own. Try this example for size: join Henry Turnbuckle, a detective on the Milwaukee police force, visiting his brother-in-law Clarence, who is sheriff of Green River County—and smile to your heart's content . . .

THE SCHOOL BUS CAPER

by **JACK RITCHIE**

I pondered. "Who would want to steal a school bus?"
"Probably some high-school kids," Clarence said. "They sneaked a few beers and then thought it would be fun to take the bus for a ride. More than likely we'll find it parked up some side road when daylight comes."

He turned the patrol car headlights into a long sparsely graveled driveway that wound uphill for a quarter of a mile and ended in front of a farmhouse, a barn, and a cluster of sheds.

It was a few minutes after seven in the morning and still almost a half an hour before official sunrise. The temperature hovered at ten above zero and the wind-chill factor must have been fifteen below.

"How does it happen that the school bus was parked up here in the first place?" I asked.

"Jackson is a school-bus driver, Henry. In the country the drivers usually take their buses home with them at night. Saves a trip all the way into town in the morning to pick them up for their routes. Jackson is a widower and retired farmer. He rents out his fields and barn to neighbors. He drives the school bus for extra cash or maybe just to feel useful."

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Clarence parked under the bluish yard light. A face had been watching at the lighted kitchen window of the farmhouse and the back door opened as we reached the stoop.

A tall weathered man in his sixties welcomed us in. "I thought I'd call on you personal instead of to headquarters in Gordonville seeing as how you live just down the road."

Clarence is the sheriff of Green River County. He introduced me. "This is my brother-in-law, Henry Turnbuckle. He's spending the Christmas holidays with me and my wife. Henry's a detective on the Milwaukee police force."

I nodded modestly. "I do the best I can."

Jackson's phone call to Clarence had come ten minutes earlier while we were finishing breakfast and I had decided to come along to see how Clarence and the sheriff's department handled these matters.

"Tell me what happened, Albert," Clarence said.

"Well, I just walked outside this morning and there it wasn't. The bus, I mean. Number 103."

"What is the license number, Albert?"

Jackson rubbed his jaw. "Darn if I remember."

I pointed to a ring of keys on the kitchen table. "If those are the bus keys, the tag on the chain ought to give us the license number."

It did and Clarence put the information in his notebook. "I don't suppose you heard or saw the bus being stolen?"

"I didn't see or hear a thing. My guess is that whoever took the bus just got inside and released the brake. That would get it rolling down the driveway all the way to the highway and he could get it started down there and I wouldn't hear the motor." He turned to me. "Number 103 sometimes gives me trouble trying to get it started on cold mornings, so I park it up here and point it down the driveway. All I have to do is release the emergency brake, put her in neutral, and let her roll. Halfway down the hill I throw out the clutch and she starts. Never failed yet."

"Mr. Jackson," I said, "did you keep the school bus locked?"

"Well, no. I guess maybe I should have, but I never thought anybody would steal her."

I indicated the ignition keys. "Since you still have the keys, how do you suppose the culprit managed to start the motor once he got the bus down the hill?"

"He probably crossed the ignition wires," Clarence said. "Did

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you phone the bus company, Albert?"

Jackson nodded. "They sent out another driver and a bus to take over my route this morning."

Clarence pocketed his notebook. "We'll radio out the word, Albert. Probably your bus will turn up somewhere as soon as it gets light."

Jackson felt the same way. "I'm not particularly worried. I mean, who would steal a school bus except some kids? I just hope they don't bang it up any."

Clarence and I drove on to Gordonville, the county seat, where the sheriff's department headquarters is located. Clarence supervises some twenty deputies and his department represents the largest single law-enforcement agency in Green River County.

At fifteen minutes after nine o'clock we received word that the bank at Ferrill had been robbed.

Clarence got off his chair. "Well, Henry, we don't get many of those. We might as well go over there and see for ourselves."

We drove 15 miles to Ferrill and parked among the sheriff's two patrol cars and a Ferrill squad car.

Inside of the bank building one of Clarence's deputies gave us the basic information.

"The bank opens at nine. One of the first people to come in was a man with a full black beard and it was pretty obvious to the bank employees that it was false. He was about medium height and medium weight and he pointed a gun. He got away with about twenty-five thousand dollars.

"A couple of customers in the café across the street noticed a bearded man carrying a satchel running out of the bank and they saw him hop into a late-model blue and white sedan. They didn't get the entire license number, but one of them remembers that the last three digits were consecutive—123."

Clarence remained long enough to make certain his department had everything under control and then we drove back to headquarters.

A deputy was waiting for us. "We found the stolen school bus." He indicated a young woman sitting on one of the wooden benches. "She was driving it about four miles west of town. She claims she's a school-bus driver and that the bus is hers."

Clarence approached the woman. "What is your name, please?"

She seemed to be controlling her temper with difficulty. "Mrs. Rebecca McCullen."

"And you claim you're a school-bus driver?"

"Damn right."

"Are you aware that you were driving a stolen bus?"

"Baloney. It's my bus. Number 88. When you drive the same bus for three years, you get to know it even if everybody else thinks they all look alike."

We went outside to the school bus parked in the lot behind headquarters. The black number 88 was painted on both sides of the bus.

I rubbed my finger over the numbers. "There's a thorough coating of road dirt over these numbers, which indicates they have not been tampered with lately." I spoke to Mrs. McCullen. "Are those your license plates on the bus?"

She shrugged. "Who remembers license numbers? But it's my bus."

"Mrs. McCullen," I said, "would you please check the plastic tag on your key chain and compare it to the license plates on your bus."

She made the comparison and frowned. "They don't match. They're different numbers. But it's still my bus, license plates or not."

I agreed. "I believe you, madam. For some insidious reason the license plates from the stolen school bus were transferred to your vehicle. Where do you keep this bus when you're not driving it?"

"On my husband's farm. Right next to the house."

"Do you know an Albert Jackson?" I asked. "He's the driver of the bus reported stolen."

She considered the name. "It doesn't ring a bell. But I might know him by sight. If he's a school-bus driver I could have seen him at one of the schools in town or maybe at the bus yard where we get our gas and servicing."

"One more question," I said. "Do you own a dog?"

"No. My husband's allergic to them."

Clarence rubbed his chin. "Well, Mrs. McCullen, I guess for the time being you might just as well go home. We'll call you if we need you again."

When Clarence and I returned to his office, there was more information concerning the Ferrill bank robbery.

The blue and white getaway car had been found just four blocks from the bank. Inside, on the front seat, the police discovered a false beard. A check of the dealer license plates on the car indi-

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cated that it had come from the Hawkins Used Car Lot in Ferrill. According to Hawkins, the bearded man had approached him at 8:30 that morning and looked over the cars in his lot. He had asked to test-drive the blue and white sedan around the block. Hawkins had said okay and that was the last he saw of the man or the car until the police found it.

Clarence reconstructed the robbery. "Our man got into the dealer's car, drove to the bank, robbed it, then drove a few blocks more around the corner, and abandoned the car. Probably he had another vehicle waiting at that point."

After lunch we received the information that Jackson's bus—with the McCullen license plates on it—had been found parked up a dirt road in a place called Murdock's Woods.

Clarence frowned thoughtfully. "That's less than half a mile from Jackson's farm."

We went to his patrol car and took the highway out of town.

I watched the cold landscape as Clarence drove. "There is the matter of the dogs," I said.

"What dogs?"

"The dogs that weren't there. If you sneak into a farmer's yard with the intention of stealing his school bus or switching license plates, what are you most likely to encounter?"

"I don't know. What am I most likely to encounter?"

"A barking dog who would raise the alarm."

"But Jackson doesn't have a dog. Neither does Mrs. McCullen."

"Exactly. That is my point. I'll wager that ninety-eight percent or more of all farms have at least one dog in residence."

Clarence nodded. "Jackson's dog was Old Brownie, but he died of old age about a month ago. Albert just hasn't had the heart to replace him yet."

I smiled. "And who would know that Albert Jackson no longer has a dog on his premises?"

"Neighbors, I suppose."

I agreed. "It's my belief that whoever stole Jackson's bus brought it back almost to the point where he stole it because he still faced the prospect of having to *walk* home. And considering that it is extremely cold today, I would put that walking distance at under a half a mile from Murdock's Woods."

Clarence cogitated. "The nearest teenager that would fit is Lance Meuhlendorfer. He lives between Murdock's Woods and Jackson's farm."

I nodded. "It's obvious that this Meuhendorfer lad would know that Jackson no longer has a dog, but how did he know that the McCullen farm didn't have one either? There is about twenty miles between the two, but there must be some common bond. Some common denominator."

As we approached Murdock's Woods, Clarence slowed the patrol car and turned into a dirt road. Fifty feet ahead we found another patrol car parked behind a yellow school bus.

A waiting trooper put out his cigarette and approached. "We tried for fingerprints, but there was nothing on the steering wheel. Whoever took the bus probably wore gloves or mittens. Not that it matters too much. We can't go to the high school and ask eight hundred boys to give us their fingerprints for comparison." He led us to the open bus door. "The ignition wires are all screwed up. I radioed in and the bus company is sending up somebody to patch things up." He looked past us. "There he is now."

A panel truck pulled up behind our car and parked. A medium-sized man in a plaid jacket got out, bringing a toolbox with him.

Clarence nodded. "Afternoon, Jim."

The man returned the nod and moved on to the school bus. We watched him crouch under the hood and shake his head. "Somebody sure made a mess of this."

Clarence and I went back to our patrol car and got in.

"That's Jim Meuhendorfer," Clarence said.

It took me a moment to grasp the significance of the name. "You mean he's the father of this Lance Meuhendorfer?"

Clarence nodded again. "Jim is the mechanic over at the bus yard garage."

I closed my eyes.

But, of course. Now everything fell into place. "Clarence, the Meuhendorfer boy might have known that Jackson did not have a dog, but how did he know that Mrs. McCullen didn't?"

"I don't know, Henry."

"But on the other hand, *Jim* Meuhendorfer could easily have learned that Mrs. McCullen didn't have a dog. After all, he worked for the bus company, and surely at some time or another when she brought in her bus for servicing or gassing, he could have fallen into conversation with her and learned about her husband's allergy to dogs. Perhaps he even *deliberately* sought out

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a country bus driver who did not own a dog."

"Henry, I don't see what you're getting at? Do you mean that Jim Meuhlendorfer stole the school bus? Not his son?"

"Precisely."

"Now, Henry, why would a grown man steal a school bus?"

I smiled. "Clarence, just let us suppose the senior Meuhlendorfer sneaked across the field to Jackson's place last night and stole the school bus. And then suppose he drove this bus some twenty miles to the McCullen farm where he knew there was no dog. And suppose he parked at the foot of their driveway, crept into their yard, and switched the license plates."

Clarence was dubious. "I've known Jim as a neighbor for a long time and he never struck me as being a practical joker."

"Ah," I said wisely, "but it was not a practical joke. In fact, it was no joke at all. After he switched the license plates he drove on to Ferrill. When he got there, he parked the school bus on a side street. He walked about a bit until eight thirty and then stopped at Hawkins' Used Car Lot and borrowed the blue and white sedan. He drove to the bank, committed his robbery, and then drove the car to the point where he had left the school bus. There he simply switched vehicles and drove back to Murdock's Woods. He parked the bus and walked home, twenty-five thousand dollars richer."

Clarence seemed pained. "Henry, don't you think it's just a little wild to use a school bus for a getaway car?"

"On the contrary, Clarence. That is the most brilliant aspect of this operation. After the bank was robbed, the alarm would of course be sent out immediately, but what patrol-car deputy would so much as glance twice at the driver of a school bus?"

Clarence stared at the parked school bus ahead. "Why did Jim go through the whole routine of switching the license plates? Wouldn't just stealing the McCullen plates and putting them on his own bus have been enough? Why put Jackson's plates on the McCullen bus?"

"Because while people do not as a general rule remember their license-plate number—particularly on school buses, I would imagine—they would be likely to notice something wrong if there is no license plate at all on their vehicle. If Mrs. McCullen herself did not notice the absence when she got into her bus for her morning rounds, surely one of the children she picked up would have and mentioned it to her. In which case she would probably

have notified the sheriff immediately and the department would have an eye out for her license-plate number. But our bank robber certainly didn't want that. He needed time, and switching the plates gave that to him. By the time the police straightened out that particular problem, he would have completed his robbery and been home safe."

Clarence was still not a believer. "Henry, you saw how messed up those wires were. Jim is an expert mechanic. If he were going to cross wires, he would know exactly what to do. It would be a neat job."

"Clarence, we are dealing with a clever man here. If he had left a neat job, we might immediately suspect someone who knew a great deal about school buses and their ignition systems. So he cunningly made us think that it was the work of an amateur."

Clarence picked up his radio microphone, made a call to headquarters, and asked that someone be sent to the bus-company garage to determine if Jim Meuhendorfer had been at work at the time the bank in Ferrill was being robbed.

We received our answer in ten minutes. According to Jim Meuhendorfer's boss, Meuhendorfer had punched in at the garage at eight o'clock, as usual, and he had been there until he was sent out to repair the ignition wires on Jackson's bus a half hour ago.

I cleared my throat. "These things are tricky, you know. Meuhendorfer could have arranged a dummy and shoved it under some school bus needing transmission work. These things have happened before. Anyone glancing into the garage would have seen the dummy and assumed it was Meuhendorfer himself. When he returned from his crime, he could have changed places with the dummy and no one would be the wiser."

"I'll be sure to check that out sometime tomorrow, Henry," Clarence said. He started the patrol car and carefully backed around Meuhendorfer's panel truck and onto the highway.

He turned south. "We might as well drop in at Jackson's place and tell him we found his bus."

Clarence drove past his own house set on an acre of land beside the road, past the Meuhendorfer home, also of ranch-style construction, and turned into Jackson's long driveway.

I closed my eyes.

"Henry," Clarence said, "you're closing your eyes again."

"I know," I said and opened them. "I see it all so clearly now.

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"Missed what?"

"Clarence, who was the person *closest* to Jackson's bus?"

"One of the Meuhlendorfers?"

"No, Clarence. The person nearest to Jackson's bus was Jackson *himself*." I smiled. "It was Jackson all the time. During the darkness of last night he got into his own bus and drove to the McCullen farm and switched license plates."

"How did he know that the McCullens did not have a dog?"

"Clarence, when you are planning an elaborate bank robbery, you make it your *business* to find out which one of the other bus drivers doesn't have a dog. And after he switched the license plates he drove to Murdock's Woods, where he parked the bus. After which he walked back to his farmhouse and reported his bus had been stolen. When you and I left him, he simply walked back to Murdock's Woods, picked up the bus, drove to Ferrill, and we know the rest of the whole sordid story."

I chuckled slightly. "But like all clever criminals he made at least one mistake. In this case, the ignition keys."

"I don't follow you, Henry."

"When we entered Jackson's house this morning, the ignition keys for the bus lay in plain sight on the kitchen table. When I wondered how the bus thief could have started the vehicle without the keys, Jackson realized he had made a mistake. He should have hidden the keys and claimed that he had accidentally left them in the bus overnight. While he was thinking desperately for some explanation you inadvertently aided him by suggesting that the thief probably crossed the ignition wires. That saved Jackson for the moment."

"But he realized that *after* he committed his robbery and abandoned the bus in Murdock's Woods, he would have to make it *appear* as though the thief had truly crossed the wires. However while Jackson is a bus driver, he is not a mechanic. He did not *know* which of the wires to cross, so he simply created anarchy under the hood in the hope that an amateur would be blamed."

Clarence pulled the car into Jackson's farmyard. "We have to consider the description of the bank robber, Henry."

"What description? The false beard hid his face."

"I wasn't thinking of the beard, Henry. The bank robber was described as of medium height and medium build. Jackson is rail-thin and six foot three."

"Oh," I said.

We gave Jackson a lift to Murdock's Woods and then continued on to Gordonville.

Clarence stopped the patrol car at the local high school. "Want to come in?"

"No," I said. "Clarence, you are barking up the wrong tree. This is definitely not a kid caper."

Clarence came back in 25 minutes. "Well, that takes care of that. I had a private fatherly talk with Lance and he decided to admit the whole thing. It's usually that way with teenagers, Henry. They can't stand the pressure of having to lie more than ten minutes at a time."

I frowned fiercely. "You mean this mere lad stole Jackson's bus, went joy riding, and switched the license plates? How did he know the McCullens didn't have a dog?"

"There were two boys in on this, Henry. Lance Meuhendorfer and Eddie Frantz. They're buddies here in high school and Eddie lives on a farm near to the McCullens. Last night Eddie stayed over at Lance's house. They sneaked some beer out of the family refrigerator and took them up to Lance's room. After they finished a few bottles they got the idea for the whole thing. They didn't mean any real harm, they just wanted to sit back and watch the fun. They'll both probably get probation."

Clarence checked out of headquarters at five o'clock and we began the drive back to his home.

After a while I smiled.

"Henry, why are you smiling?"

"Clarence, how old are the Meuhendorfer and the Frantz boys?"

"They're both nearly eighteen."

"Ah, and would one, or both of them, by any *remote* chance be of *medium* height and *medium* build?"

"No," Clarence said. "They're well over six feet and weigh close to two-fifty. They're linemen on the football team."

I watched the passing countryside. It was really depressing at this time of year, if you wanted to be honest about it.

When we reached Clarence's house I took off my overcoat and sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs.

My sister Madge appeared in the kitchen doorway. "Have a nice day?"

I sighed. "Madge, do you have any sherry in the house?"

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"I'm afraid not, Henry. How about a beer?"

Clarence looked at me. "Sherry?"

Madge nodded. "Whenever Henry is feeling particularly depressed or frustrated, he usually has some sherry."

"Oh," Clarence said, "Do you drink much sherry, Henry?"

Was he being sarcastic?

Clarence smiled. "I'll tell you what I'll do, Henry. I'll drive back to town and get you a bottle of sherry. No trouble at all. I have to get some more beer anyway."

While he was gone, I paged glumly through a family photo album. I paused at a faded snapshot of a man and a woman. The man sported a full beard. He was probably one of Clarence's grandparents.

I studied him and then rubbed my jaw. I went to the Gordonville area phone book and turned to the yellow pages. I found there was only one liquor store listed and I dialed the number. I left the proprietor a message that when Clarence arrived there, he should phone me immediately.

The return call came in three minutes.

"Clarence," I said, "do you remember that the bank employees in Ferrill *all* agreed that the beard worn by the bank robber was obviously false?"

"Yes, Henry."

"Well, if I were a used-car dealer and a stranger wearing an obviously false beard came to me and asked to take out one of my best cars on a solo run, would I really let him do it? At the very least, wouldn't I go along as a passenger? But Hawkins didn't. You don't suppose that this particular incident never really occurred at all?"

Clarence returned home more than an hour and a half later.

He sighed. "Hawkins is medium height and medium weight and we found the twenty-five thousand dollars in the trunk of an Edsel he had on his lot." He looked at the wrapped bottle in his hands. "Here's your sherry, Henry."

I smiled. "Thank you, but I don't think I'll need any now."

Clarence, however, had two thoughtful glasses of sherry before we sat down to dinner.

"Q"